



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Whooping Crane

## *Oklahoma Ecological Service Field Office*

### Whooping Crane

*Grus americana*

#### Description

At 5 feet (1.5 m), the whooping crane is the tallest American bird. It is a snowy white, long-necked bird with long legs. Its black primary feathers show only during flight. Adults have a red crown and a patch of black feathers below the eye. Young are whitish overall, but have a rusty-colored head and neck.

#### Distribution

Whooping cranes pass through western Oklahoma each spring and fall during migration. The Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, near Jet, Oklahoma, is a very important migration stopover area and is designated critical habitat. During migration, whooping cranes sometimes are sighted elsewhere in Oklahoma along rivers, in grain fields, or in shallow wetlands. Whooping cranes primarily use shallow, seasonally and semi permanently flooded palustrine wetlands and various cropland and emergent wetlands.

#### Life History

The whooping crane is a bi-annual migrant, traveling between its summer habitat in central Canada, and its wintering grounds on the Texas coast, across the Great Plains of the U.S. in the spring and fall of each year. Autumn migration normally begins in mid-September, with most birds arriving on the Texas wintering grounds between late October and mid-November. Spring migration departure dates are normally between late March and mid-April, with the last birds usually leaving by May 1. Whooping cranes migrate south as singles, pairs, in family groups, or as small flocks of 3 to 5 birds. They are diurnal migrants and stop daily to feed and rest. Whooping cranes eat a variety of things, including insects, frogs, small birds, rodents, minnows, and waste grains.



*Whooping crane.* USFWS

#### Conservation

By the mid- 1940s, only 15 whooping cranes were present in the wild. The whooping was federally listed as an endangered species on March 11, 1967 (32 FR 4001). An intensive captive-breeding program and careful protection of wild flocks have slowly increased the number in the wild to more than 120. Whooping cranes have declined primarily because of loss of wintering and breeding habitat. Current threats to wild cranes include collisions with manmade objects such as power lines and fences, shooting, predators, disease, habitat destruction, severe weather, and a loss of two thirds of the original genetic material.

#### What Can You Do to Help

Sightings are important for monitoring the status of federally-listed species.

To report whooping crane sightings to the US Fish and Wildlife Service please complete the sighting report form (<http://whoopingcrane.com/report-a-sighting/>) within the migration corridors, continue to gather sighting reports for whooping cranes and promote public awareness. Ongoing conservation of wetland habitat within historical stopover habitat is

helpful. Private landowners should be provided with incentives to manage lands to benefit wetlands in historic migration, breeding, and wintering areas. Additionally, purchase land or conservation easements in areas that still support healthy wetlands.

#### References

Canadian Wildlife Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2007. *International recovery plan for the whooping crane*. Ottawa: Recovery of Nationally Endangered Wildlife (RENEW), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, New Mexico. 162 pp.

#### For Further Information

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